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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLES THE CABINET TO SHORE UP
THE RULING COALITION

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt, Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (SBU) On November 26 PM Singh announced a mini-cabinet shuffle, the first since the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government took office over six months ago. Looking ahead to state elections early next year Shibu Soren, the controversial chief of the regional Jharkhand Mukti Morcha party, returned as Minister of Coal. The Minister of Labor and Employment, Sis Ram Ola, was named to head the newly-created Ministry of Mines. Minister without portfolio and head of the regional Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) K. Chandrasekhara Rao was given the Labor portfolio. The President swore in the three new ministers on November 27. Notably missing from the long anticipated cabinet reshuffle was the controversial Home Minister Shivraj Patil, who remains in place.

¶2. (U) Soren was originally named to the cabinet as Minister of Coal when the UPA assumed power six months ago. However, he was forced to resign on July 24 after a court in his home state of Jharkhand issued a warrant for his arrest in a 20 year old murder case. Soren then dropped from sight for several months before surrendering, spending a month in jail and being granted bail. His case is still pending. On November 27, BJP spokesman and General Secretary Arun Jaitley told reporters that his party would raise the issue of Soren's reinduction when Parliament convenes on December 6, but would not disrupt the session as it had done previously.

Comment

¶3. (C) Soren is accused of masterminding a "massacre" of his political opponents in Jharkhand twenty years ago, and many say he is guilty. Even if he escapes prosecution in that case, he is also accused of ordering the murder of his personal assistant and could be arrested in that case soon. PM Singh has a reputation for probity and reportedly opposed bringing Soren into the cabinet, but felt compelled to do so by the pressures of coalition politics. With Soren back on board, the JMM and Congress can now form an alliance in Jharkhand that will likely defeat the BJP government there and give the state to the UPA in the February 2005 elections. Likewise, Rao's TRS had threatened to withdraw from the UPA if it did not separate Telangana from Karnataka and create a new state. Rather than give in to the TRS, Congress agreed to set up a sub-committee to look into the issue and placated Rao by giving him a Cabinet portfolio.

¶4. (SBU) Although the Labor Ministry has oversight of our \$20 million child labor elimination project, we do not expect the change of ministers to have any impact on that effort or other US interests in India. The Coal Mine Safety and Health bilateral project will be ending in January and this shake-up will likely not affect its success either.

BLAKE